



VOLLEYBALL

Nebraska Cornhuskers

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Nebraska aiming for women's attendance record with game inside football's Memorial Stadium



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Nebraska is going for the record.

Actually, make that the records, plural.

One, the NCAA record for women's volleyball attendance, will be obliterated on Aug. 30, when the Cornhuskers host Nebraska-Omaha on a court erected inside the university's Memorial Stadium, which has a listed capacity of 85,458 but has in the past exceeded 90,000 spectators.

"We talk about all the time how we're going to tell our kids about that one day, so it's a huge honor to be part of something so big and so special," said junior outside hitter Merritt Beason. "Our team is super excited."

But there's the NCAA attendance record for women's volleyball, then there's the national record for any women's sporting event, and then there's the world record – and every single one might fall.

The biggest crowd to attend a women's sporting event in the United States is the 90,185 who packed the Rose Bowl to watch the 1999 World Cup final between the U.S. and China. Next is the world record of 91,648 set when Barcelona hosted Wolfsburg last April in a UEFA Women's Champions League match.

"Yes, we believe that goal will be attained," Nebraska athletics director Trev Alberts told USA TODAY Sports. "I think the number is going to be pushing closer to 95,000."

More than just a spectacle to highlight Nebraska's women's program, the event speaks to the measurable increase in interest and popularity around college volleyball and women's sports in general on the NCAA level. Wednesday's event has already spawned at least one imitator looking to highlight its own women's programs in a similar venue.

But there is something uniquely Nebraska about what is expected to be a record-setting event: If you play it, they will come. And they'll pack the house.

How to watch the Nebraska volleyball match

Date: Wednesday, Aug. 30, 2023

Start time: 8 p.m. ET

Television broadcast: Big Ten Network

The genesis of Nebraska's volleyball day

The idea for this event was inspired by Wisconsin.

The Cornhuskers co-own with Wisconsin the overall NCAA volleyball attendance record (18,755), set when the two met in the 2021 national championship game in Columbus, Ohio. But the Badgers set a new regular-season record (16,833) in a match against Florida last September, sneaking past the previous mark (15,797) set when Creighton hosted Nebraska one week earlier.

"The attendance record for volleyball belongs in the state of Nebraska," Alberts said in April.

"Wisconsin, being as competitive as they are, went and took one of our attendance records away," said longtime Cornhuskers coach John Cook, who has won 659 games and four national championships since taking over the program in 2000. "So we're like, 'How are we going to get it back?'"

Two years ago this month, Memorial Stadium drew nearly 90,000 for a Garth Brooks concert, giving the administration a roadmap for how to put on non-football events. Afterwards, Alberts and others asked: What else can we do?

Coming off the 50th anniversary of Title IX, which Nebraska celebrated at every home football game last season, the university latched onto the idea of building an event around one of the top women's programs in college athletics.

The Cornhuskers lead the nation in wins since 1975, have been nationally ranked in every American Volleyball Coaches Association poll since 1982, have sold out every home game since 2001 and have won five national championships, the first coming in 1995 under Cook's predecessor, Terry Pettit.

"It just kind of all seemed to make sense," said Alberts. "We're celebrating Title IX. We've become a national leader in women's athletics."

Nebraska's regular-season match against Omaha will come after an exhibition match between two other in-state programs, Nebraska-Kearney and Wayne State. Country musician Scotty McCreery will play a concert following the second match.

"Let's celebrate volleyball in the state of Nebraska," Alberts said. "Let's use athletics to bring our state together. And yeah, let's have some fun. Let's break a record once and for all."

How Nebraska is planning and staging the event

The event has posed a series of logistical hurdles related to scheduling, planning and production.

"There were a lot of concerns," Alberts said.

One factor in the school's favor: Nebraska football opens the 2023 season with two road games before returning to Memorial Stadium for the home opener against Northern Illinois on Sept. 16, eliminating the need for a quick-change overhaul of the playing surface.

That's a good thing, given the steps involved in constructing and deconstructing the volleyball court and the separate stage for the postgame performance.

Building the staging for the court required dealing with the slight crown on Memorial Stadium to create an even playing surface. To do so, the company contracted for the event screwed together two different layers of plywood and then laid down the regular court. On top of that will be layers of Taraflex, a popular brand of modular flooring that limits slipping and adds shock absorption.

The regulation-size court – roughly 20 yards long and roughly 10 yards wide – will begin at the lip of Memorial Stadium's north end zone and run south, with benches and seating on the east and west sides along with additional seating on the south end.

Bleachers will run along the width of the north end zone. Standing-room areas for students will surround both sides of the court, running from the end zone across midfield to roughly the opposite 25-yard line. The concert stage will be located at the end of the student area.

According to financial details shared by the university, the field covering will cost \$133,600. Staging, including the bleachers, will cost another \$279,888.

In all, when including event setup, event staffing and the spectator and student-athlete experience, the university will have expenses of roughly \$1.3 million for the event.

While the university and the city of Lincoln are adept at putting on Saturday events for home football games, this event has posed a different challenge: How can the school bring in this many people on a weekday?

To ease concerns over congestion, the university purchased satellite parking at a "really significant" cost, Albert said. In addition, Nebraska rented 90 buses to transport people from campus and the surrounding community.

"I mean, we're going all out," Alberts said. "We're going to be doing as much or more for this event as we do for a home football game against Michigan. If we're going to really celebrate women's athletics, we're going to do it at a commensurate level or higher."

Will Nebraska set the attendance record?

Nebraska has also agreed to share revenue with the three in-state schools. Omaha, Kearney and Wayne State will be guaranteed \$50,000 payouts if no weather issues force the event inside, which Alberts called a "big number for those schools."

"I'm thinking, 'This is nuts, there's no way we can do this,'" Cook said, "and (Alberts) and our president and our governor said, 'We're going to do it.'"

"We're bringing back the alumni, so now it becomes this huge celebration and an attempt to break the attendance record and maybe one that will never ever be broken."

The university sold approximately 82,900 tickets in just three days in late April, with the first day reserved for season-ticket holders and two others for the general public.

As of earlier this month, Nebraska had sold over 90,000 tickets. The school will exceed listed capacity and then some by selling additional field-level passes and standing-room tickets.

But like a future couple eyeballing the weather map in advance of wedding day, Nebraska administrators have one overriding concern: What if it rains? The Weather Channel is forecasting clear skies with winds between 10 and 15 miles per hour.

Nebraska does have a plan for any weather issues, but it's a disappointing one. Season-ticket holders have been given two tickets: one for Memorial Stadium and one for the Devaney Center, which hosts volleyball and other sports. In the case of unsuitable weather, the event will simply move inside.

"It'll be a challenge," Alberts admits. "There are 91,000 people coming to Lincoln for a game, and if the weather doesn't work, only about 8,500, maybe 9,000 of them are going to leave happy."

What the event says about NCAA women's sports

Wednesday's event comes as the sport is experiencing dramatic growth.

According to the National Federation of State High School Associations, girl's volleyball had 454,153 participants during the 2021-22 school year, leaving the sport just 2,500 participants behind track and field for the most popular girls sport. Participation has grown approximately 11% in the past five years and 34% in the last decade, according to data provided by USA Volleyball, the sport's national governing body.

ESPN will air more than 2,500 women's volleyball matches across multiple platforms this season, the most in the network's history. ESPN will air more than 945 matches in September alone.

The matches in Memorial Stadium have led to at least one similar event and could lead to other games played inside larger venues featuring some of the top women's programs in college sports.

"But if you're looking at what we're capable of, women's volleyball at Nebraska is putting a court on the middle of their football field," said Oklahoma softball coach Patty Gasso, who has won the last three national championships and seven overall. "They've sold out 80,000 fans already. So you know what my next conversation to (athletics director) Joe Castiglione is going to be."

For now, the only school with a similar event in the works is Iowa, which will face DePaul in an outdoor women's basketball scrimmage at Kinnick Stadium on Oct. 15.

The Hawkeyes' event, called the "Crossover in Kinnick," will be a showcase for last year's national runners-up and senior guard Caitlin Clark, the reigning national player of the year.

"We're super excited to play in front of the best fans in the country inside Kinnick Stadium," said senior guard Gabbie Marshall. "We're thankful to have an administration that gives us this platform to elevate our sport."

The events at Nebraska and Iowa speak to a deeper point than just one match or game: Women's sports on the college level, and the student-athletes involved, have never been bigger.

And while increasingly popular, these competitions could further broaden the interest in sports such as women's volleyball by potentially bringing in a new audience drawn to the spectacle of this unique event.

"It's a whirlwind of emotions to know that we're going to be playing in front of that many people, but I think all of us know how important this is and not just for the sport of volleyball but for women's sports in general," said Nebraska junior libero Lexi Rodriguez.

"It's a huge monument for where women's sports are going and I think it's an amazing first step. It going to be really fun to be part of."